

K'uo-an (active c. 1150)

*The Ox-Herding Poems* (complete)

*The earliest series of ox-herding poems was composed around 1050 by Ch'ing-chu; they are only partially preserved. Another set composed by P'u-ming was circulated in Chinese Zen circles, but the series that became best known in East Asia was written and illustrated by K'uo-an Shih-yuan in the mid-twelfth century. Woodblock book versions of this series were printed over the next few hundred years in China and Japan, and it was K'uo-an's illustrations that became the model for most later painters. As a metaphor for the path to enlightenment, the ox-herding poems and paintings have often been utilized by Zen Masters over the centuries; for example, when Zekkai Chushin was asked in 1395 to explain Zen Buddhism to the Shogun, he used K'uo-an's book as a point of departure for his explanations.*

*Some sets of ox-herding paintings end with the eighth, the empty circle, but the final two are also important: after enlightenment, one comes back to the world—both for one's own continuing practice and to help all others. The examples here were painted in traditional style by a contemporary Korean monk.*

**1. Searching for the Ox**

Searching through tall,  
endless grass,  
Rivers, mountain ranges, the  
path trails off.  
Weary, exhausted, no place left  
to hunt:  
Maples rustle, evening, the  
cicada's song.



## 2. Finding the Tracks

Along the river, under trees—  
jumbled tracks!  
Thick fragrant woods, is this  
the way?  
Though the ox wanders far in  
the hills,  
His nose touches the sky. He  
cannot hide.



## 3. Seeing the Ox

Oriole on a branch chirps and  
chirps,  
Sun warm, breeze through the  
willows.  
There is the ox, cornered,  
alone.  
That head, those horns! Who  
could paint them?



## 4. Catching the Ox

Last desperate effort, got him!  
Hard to control, powerful and  
wild,  
The ox sprints up a hill and at  
the top  
Disappears into the misty  
clouds.



### 5. Taming the Ox

Don't lose the whip, hold onto  
the rope  
Or he'll buck away into the  
dirt.  
Herded well, in perfect  
harmony  
He'll follow along without any  
constraint.



### 6. Riding the Ox Home

Riding the ox home, taking it  
easy,  
The flute's notes vanish in the  
evening haze.  
Tapping time to a folk song,  
happy as can be—  
It's all too much for words.



### 7. Ox Forgotten

Reaching home on the back of  
the ox,  
Rest now, the ox forgotten.  
Taking a nap under the noon  
sun,  
Whip and rope abandoned  
behind the hut.





### 8. Ox Transcended

Whip, rope, self, ox—no  
traces left.  
Thoughts cannot penetrate the  
vast blue sky,  
Snowflakes cannot survive a  
red-hot stove.  
Arriving here, meet the ancient  
teachers.



### 9. Returning to the Source

Return to the source, no more  
effort,  
Just staying at home, sitting in  
the hut,  
Blind and deaf to the world  
outside.  
The river runs by itself, flowers  
are red.



### 10. Entering the Marketplace

Barefoot and shirtless, enter  
the market  
Smiling through all the dirt  
and grime.  
No immortal powers, no secret  
spells,  
Just teach the withered trees to  
bloom.



—Translation by Stanley Lombardo